THE REV. ISAAC M. BARR, APOSTLE OF THE CANADIAN NORTHWEST

The power of imagination to triumph over the world of practicability was never better revealed than in the person of an Anglican clergyman who at the age of fifty-three emerged from a rather unspectacular career to become the leader of a colonization scheme which was hailed in its time as "the greatest emigration from England since the departure of William Penn." His name was the Rev. Isaac M. Barr, and his scheme was to settle an "all-British" colony on the prairies of the Canadian northwest.

The architect of this venture, himself a Canadian born in Halton County, Ontario, claimed to have had experience in the Canadian northwest as early as 1864. Primary sources for a biographical sketch are thin but it has been customary in legend and secondary accounts to deride the Rev. Barr as a swindler of sorts. Mrs. Helen Reid's lively and uncritical account in Maclean's Magazine (December 14, 1963) labels him "The Clerical Con Man Who Helped to Settle the West." More accurately, Clive Tallant describes him as a man "capable of planning but not implementing," by which he probably meant that Barr had some of the virtues of the good administrator but none of his prudence or practical wisdom. In any event, whether or not these characterizations are accurate, the Rev. Isaac M. Barr must certainly be given credit for possessing the most underrated gift of all in public affairs - the capacity to think imaginatively and to write forceful, persuasive prose. Thanks to "a fertile mind and a facile pen," he mushroomed a modest proposal for promoting emigration into a major colonization enterprise which made a definite contribution to the development of the Canadian northwest.

Self-styling himself the founder and director of the British Colony for the Saskatchewan Valley, the Rev. Barr propagated his scheme through

newspapers, lectures, and pamphlets. The earliest of the pamphlets which the writer has been able to locate is entitled COLONIZATION / IN / NORTH-WESTERN CANADA / OAK LAWN, HOLLY PLACE, CHURCH HILL, LONDON, N. / 1902, written while Barr was in charge of a London church, St. Saviour's Tollington Park, London, North. This three-page circular was addressed in the form of a letter from his home Oak Lawn, Holly Park, Church Hill, London, and signed Isaac M. Barr, Curate in Charge, St. Saviour's Church. It was printed early in August 1902, and was intended to answer numerous inquiries from prospective colonists who were reading about the colonization scheme in the newspapers. After setting forth some of the advantages of cooperative emigration, the circular explains in general terms the availability of free grant lands on the prairies of western Canada, the best time to make the journey, the opportunities open to tradesmen as well as farmers, and the probable expenses of traveling to and establishing a homestead. Barr states that a specific site has not been determined, but that an agent will soon be sent to Canada to make a block reservation of homestead land. Significantly, in the light of later events, he implies that his plans have the full cooperation of the Canadian Commissioner of Emigration in England with whom he has been in direct touch. Anticipating that his party will be relatively small, he writes: "Before the party arrives at its destination, a commodious and inexpensive building - simply a shell of rough lumber - would be constructed to shelter the people, until they get their log, or frame cabins, or houses, built upon their homesteads..."

The second pamphlet from the pen of the Rev. Isaac M. Barr, numbering fifteen pages, is entitled BRITISH / SETTLEMENTS / IN / NORTH WESTERN / CANADA / ON / FREE GRANT LANDS. / CANADA FOR THE BRITISH. / equotation from John Richard Green, / BY / REV. ISAAC M. BARR / CURATE

IN CHARGE, / ST. SAVIOUR'S CHURCH, / TOLLINGTON PARK, / LONDON, N. Barr announces (p. 14) his decision to go to Canada himself to select a site for the colony, which he thinks will be somewhere in the Saskatchewan valley between Battleford and Edmonton. Further evidence on the dating of this pamphlet is furnished by the fact that a copy was enclosed with a letter dated October 1, 1902 to the Commissioner of Emigration. In his characteristically discursive but always lucid and persuasive style, Barr sets forth the purpose of the emigration plan, types of colonists sought, amount of money and effects to take along, opportunities for those with limited means, and general information about steamship and railroad fares. He describes the first steps to be taken on arrival at the colony site such as signing up for a homestead, building a shelter, and planting crops. He gives some inkling of his ideas for cooperative enterprises which were later to bring him into conflict with his colleagues. Apart from a few excesses such as his proud claim to leadership of the plan, the document is a sensible one. Barr closes with a summary of the advantages of the proposed emigration scheme and a promise to lead out a second party the year following its establishment.

As promised in the second pamphlet, Barr made an exploratory trip to Canada the 30th of September, 1902, returning in time to publish under a Christmas dateline his longest and most optimistic report which he entitled BRITISH SETTLEMENTS / IN / NORTH - WESTERN CANADA / ON / FREE GRANT LANDS. / CANADA FOR THE BRITISH / REPORT OF MY JOURNEY TO THE SASKATCHEWAN / VALLEY, N.W. CANADA, TO SELECT LAND FOR / THE FIRST BRITISH SETTLEMENT./ «quotations from John Richard Green and Kipling» / BY / REV. I. M. BARR / LATE CURATE IN CHARGE, / ST. SAVIOUR'S CHURCH, TOLLINGTON PARK, / LONDON, N. This pamphlet numbers twenty-eight pages

and is addressed in the form of a letter, dated Christmas, 1902. There can be no doubt of the success of his trip. Canadian government officials pledged their support by recommending a favorable site, making block reservations for the colonists, and arranging for Barr to meet with their officers and land agents in the west to examine the lands at first hand. So wrote Barr in his report. Certainly he wasted no time in making himself known. He speaks to officials of a new railway about work for his people on the construction of a portion of the line which was expected to pass through the colony site; to land officials of the Hudson's Bay Company; to steamship and railroad officers about special rates and provision for transporting the settlers; to an Edmonton lumber firm about floating lumber down the Saskatchewan river for house building; to equipment dealers whose location near the colony site would make them accessible for supplies; and to others in position of leadership and authority. Barr has an engaging way of collecting every remotely complimentary reference to himself or his actions; he then produces them with reference to his choice of site, his observations on the climate and his arrangements for reserving the lands. As a straight journalist, or rather as commentator, he is most effective in describing the healthy and invigorating climate, soil, water supply, timber, grasses, fruits, vegetables, and game to be found. He assures the colonists that the sailing date is not far off and gives precise information about passage, railway fares, and supplies which they will need to take on the journey. He is shrewd in announcing the enlistment of the Rev. George E. Lloyd as chaplain, a man whose pioneering experience and integrity are known to many of the colonists. In some ways his appeal to the prospective emigrant is materialistic in the extreme. He concentrates on the opportunity to supplement one's free

grant land by the purchase of adjoining railway lands, to invest in a stores syndicate, to establish for a fee homesteads in absentia, and, above all, to cash in on the boundless prosperity before the Americans move in to claim all the best land. He hints at a number of proposals for cooperative services but is firm in stressing the laissez faire doctrine of each for himself. In spite of an unconquerable display of optimism, Barr warns the colonists in the end that no one should join the group who is not prepared to work hard and to endure hardships during the first few years. (p.23):

> I do not desire to present a picture that is highly rose-coloured. There are difficulties and drawbacks to be encountered, but for the brave man obstacles are something to be overcome, stepping stones to victory and success. Britons have ever been the great colonizers. Let it not be said that we are the degenerate sons of brave and masterful sires.
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> Let me say, in brief, you cannot pick up nuggets of gold on the surface of the soil - you must dig for the wealth of the land. Hard work, and plenty of it, lies before you; more or less of hardship, and not seldom privations. You must sometimes sweat, and sometimes you may suffer from the cold. You shall not always find everything to your hand. Many of the comforts of England you must leave behind.

In some ways this pamphlet is less polished and more discursive than either of its predecessors. But its point is simple: Canada has free land but lacks the manpower, particularly British manpower, to develop its unlimited natural resources. Therefore, decide: if you don't

mind hard work, if you want to make a good investment, and if you want "Canada for the British," then join the Barr party. If you are afraid or want the comforts of England, stay at home.

In the third pamphlet just described, Barr spoke of the need for a "training home farm" (p. 18) for which he stated "I have completed the prospectus, and have sent it to the Press." This 12-page publication appeared in early 1903 under the title BRITISH SETTLEMENTS / IN / CANADA. / THE CANADIAN CO-OPERATIVE HOME FARM NO. 1 / A PRACTICAL SCHOOL OF TRAINING IN / AGRICULTURE AND STOCK-RAISING. It is a remarkable performance combining planning genius with practical naiveté. In it he proposes that groups, each made up of twenty young men, organize themselves into a limited cooperative company, acquire a section of land (640 acres), build a community house and farm sheds, and work the land together under the direction of a farm overseer. The project was to be financed by shares at $300 a participant, and, in addition, each person was expected to enter for a homestead adjacent to or near the home farm. Although the main purpose of the co-operative was to train the novice to manage his own farm, Barr perceived that there might well be profits and provided for the division of such profits, if any, among the participants when the home farm was sold. Three years was regarded as sufficient to train a farmer. The organization, constitution, and government of the proposed co-operative reads like a parliamentary manual - responsibility to someone for every act and ultimate appeal to a supreme court. There is no religious creed. Law and order are the governing principles. So far as this writer can determine, the home farm idea never got off the ground.

On March 31, 1903, the Rev. Isaac M. Barr sailed with the main body of colonists from Liverpool. Almost up to the day of departure,

he labored stupendously. His production of circulars and notices was phenomenal. There were announcements of changes in sailing dates, opening of banking services, and the like; questionnaires to elicit information for allocating the homesteads before arrival at the colony site; prospectuses inviting the colonists to invest in railway land, a general stores syndicate for settlers to purchase supplies, and a transport company to carry the settlers' outfits and supplies to the colony site; circulars offering services such as house building, ploughing, property protection for absentee members who wished to join the party but were unable to go out during the first year; a summary of the information needed for making the journey from England to the colony; advice about health and hygiene; advertisements --- all, according to Barr, prepared with full knowledge of and "under the sanction of the Canadian government." A change in style of writing is detectable. Proud of his work, proud of the response from the people, and proud of his prodigious output, he begins to dogmatize with the glibness of a man who knows he is in command and may dispense with persuasion and pleading. His final summary sounds more like a general's orders than an appeal to colonists. Nevertheless, his work was absorbing and exhilarating, and many of the ideas and proposals make good sense and stand as a monument to his vision even though he failed to carry them out. His circular on hospital insurange is a good example. He proposed to set up a hospital tent service immediately on the arrival of the colonists at the site, to provide twelve beds, and to place a trained nurse in charge. To pay for this, he proposed the following:

> ...After exhaustive investigation, I have come to the conclusion that the principle of insuring against sickness is the one most suited for my Colony, and I therefore wish to notify those who are joining my Settlement

that if they will undertake to contribute under the following scale to this Hospital, they will be protected against and guaranteed full treatment in sickness and accident:-

ADULTS (Male or Female) - £1 per head per annum (in maternity cases an extra £2.2s. per week will be charged).

CHILDREN (under 15 years) - 10s. per head per annum.

FAMILY TICKETS - In case of families over five, there will be, where all insure, a reduction of 20 per cent.

Annual tickets will be issued, which will entitle the holder to hospital care, medical attendance and nursing, board and lodging; the only extra will be for medicines, and these will be supplied at wholesale prices.

An assiduous researcher might be able to show that this idea was not original with Barr, but the fact remains that it set forth the essentials of a medical and hospital insurance plan which in essence was adopted some fifty years later by residents of the very province in which the colony was located.

When the colonists reached Lloydminster, their ultimate destination, they found that most of the things Barr had promised existed for the most part only on paper, in his pamphlets - the immediate establishment in full operation of a community store, temporary shelter in a government house on arrival, the transportation company, the colony hospital, and the home building and farm instruction department. No doubt in all his arrangements Barr was hampered by inexperience, lack of capital,

and his imperviousness to all suggestions emanating from the Canadian immigration officers. No doubt the unexpected and overwhelming response to his ideas by the British public went to his head, but apart from this pardonable fault, his inability to delegate authority, a developing sense of his own infallability, and a dangerously facile pen, all combined to set him off soaring into the clouds at a time when his only hope was to keep his feet on the ground. If he has earned no other praise, he must receive his due as one of the most persuasive apostles of the Canadian northwest.

References

Sources used in the preparation of this article were: the Department of Interior (Canada) file no1 194804 of the Public Archives of Canada; the Barr Colony manuscripts in the University of Saskatchewan Library, Canadiana room; the Lloydminster file and Barr Colony material in the Archives Division of the Legislative Library, Regina, and its branch in the University of Saskatchewan Library at Saskatoon; and the writer's private collection of letters and contemporary documents. Reference is made to Clive Tallant's article "The Break with Barr" which appeared in Saskatchewan History, Spring 1953. All photographs were secured from the Archives Division of the Legislative Library.

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